

KENT COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
Thursday, February 11, 2016
Room 310, Administration Building
Agribusiness Community Work Group Report
- WORK SESSION -

Meeting called to order at 7:30 a.m. by Chair James R. Saalfeld.

Present: Commissioners Antor, Bolter, Brieve, Bulkowski, Chivis, Hennessy, Jones, Kallman, Koorndyk, Mast, Morgan, Ponstein, Shroll, Stek, Talen, Vander Molen, Vonk, Voorhees, Chair Saalfeld - 19.

Absent: None.

INTRODUCTION

Chair Saalfeld explained that the Agribusiness Community Work Group (ACWG) was appointed by the Board of Commissioners (BOC) in May 2014, and included Commissioners Jones, Ponstein, and Saalfeld (Chair). The group met 12 times between June 2014 and October 2015. The ACWG Report was received at the November 19, 2015, BOC meeting. Today's work session is to review the information and recommendations in the ACWG Report and will be led by Assistant Administrator Mary Swanson.

(Note: Public Comment will be moved to Item 3 after the ACWG presentation.)

OVERVIEW

Ms. Swanson reviewed what led up to the formation of the ACWG. The BOC formed the Urban Sprawl Subcommittee in 2000. As a result of that Subcommittee's recommendations, the Board adopted its Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) Program in an effort to control sprawl in 2001. The BOC's Executive Committee discussed the idea of expanding and promoting the County's agricultural economy by exploring the agribusiness industry. As a result, the ACWG was formed in May 2014. The 14-member work group included:

- Jim Saalfeld, *Chair* – County Commissioner
- Diane Jones – County Commissioner
- Stan Ponstein – County Commissioner
- Steve Grimm – Cannon Township Supervisor
- Bryan Harrison – Caledonia Charter Township Supervisor
- Rick Chapla – The Right Place, Inc.
- Rick Baker – Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce
- Mimi Fritz – Downtown Market
- Bryan Posthumus – Local Agribusiness Owner
- Ed Robinette – Local Agribusiness Owner
- Patty Birkholz – League of Conservation Voters
- Bert Bleke – Interested Citizen
- Dr. Paul Isely – Grand Valley State University
- Steve Wilson – Frey Foundation

The charge of the ACWG: To consider what steps can be taken to help support, expand, and attract agribusiness (including both agricultural production and processing) in Kent County. This charge should include consideration of: (i) what tools can be reasonably applied to ensure efficient, suitable land for plant and animal-based production; (ii) what efforts can be used to encourage local market outlets and processors to be located close to the product point; and, (iii) what steps can be taken to further promote Kent County for its agribusiness on a regional and national scale. Recommendations should be mindful of the limited resources local governments have to fund non-core/discretionary matter, and should address the likely means for funding recommended actions now and going forward.

The ACWG invited 16 speakers (see names below) to offer ideas and answers to the following questions:

1. What tools or methods would you see as valuable in ensuring sufficient and suitable land for agricultural production?
2. What efforts should be used to encourage/support local market outlets? Are some outlets superior to others in the context of promoting agriculture?
3. What can be done locally to support production and to encourage producers to be located close to production to enhance efficiency?
4. Is there anything government is currently doing that hinders the growth of agribusiness in Kent County? What do you believe local government can do to support Kent County's agribusinesses and agricultural economy on a regional and national scale?

Speakers:

- Birgit Klohs; President and CEO of the Right Place, Inc.
- Dr. Adam Kantrovich; Educator, Michigan State University Extension, Institute of Agriculture and Agribusiness
- Dan Lennon; CEO, West Michigan Turkey Producers
- Jim Byrum; President, Michigan Agri-Business Association
- Mark Knudsen; Director of Planning and Performance Improvement, Ottawa County
- Mike DiBernardo; Michigan Department of Agriculture
- Joni Gruner; Michigan Department of Agriculture
- Matt Woolford; Director of Equalization, Kent County
- Mark Younquist; Michigan Apple Commission
- Steve Thome; Fruit Grower and Member of the Tree Fruit Commission
- Rob Steffens; Fruit Grower, Sparta Township Trustee

- Collin McLean; Certified Workforce Development Professional, MiWorks!
- Amy Lebednick; Certified Workforce Development Professional, MiWorks!
- Steve Cooper; COO / General Manager, Continental Dairy Facilities, LLC
- Russ Slater; Retired IT Business Consultant, Member, Kent County Agricultural Preservation Board; Environmental Advocate
- Stacy Byers; Consultant, Kent County Agricultural Preservation Board Coordinator, Ingham County Farmland and Open Spaces Program

Common themes that became evident during the meetings:

- A. Develop new products and markets
- B. Transportation and logistics
- C. Land/Water
- D. Labor, Talent and Work Force Development
- E. Processing and Technology

(Note: An in-depth breakdown/explanation of each theme is in the report.)

General Recommendations

- Agribusiness is very important to Kent County
 - Education and awareness are key to keeping agribusiness in the forefront of all stakeholders.
- All components of the industry are of equal importance
 - No one area should be a singular or even primary focus.
- Seek to engage agribusiness leaders and representatives in developing public policy.
- Knowing where to help or 'get out of the way.'

Specific Recommendations

- Improve awareness of access to information sharing and assistance programs
- Maintain transportation networks and policies
- Support GVMC consolidated planning and zoning map project
- Promote Lower Grand River Organization of Watersheds
- Partnership in Ottawa County's Great Lakes ag-tech Incubator

Two overarching themes which are an integral part of the recommendations:

- **Building Awareness and Providing Education**

Underlying each of the recommendations in this report is the need for increased awareness of the importance of agribusiness in our community and the contributions it makes to our quality of life. The success of any public policy or government initiative relies on a strong base of citizens and policy makers well-versed in its benefits. Providing information and education to the general public and policy makers on the connection between governmental policies and programs related to land use, zoning, preservation, workforce development and transportation to a robust and sustainable agricultural economy is essential.

- **Facilitating Collaboration and Cooperation**

While various sectors and segments of agribusinesses across the region have joined forces to work on specific markets, product processing or logistical issues, the industry as a whole does not have a common identity with a critical mass and collective strategy. As a result, it is less able than other local industries and organizations to access resources and influence public policies that impact its success. County and local governments have multiple opportunities to engage agribusiness leaders and industry representatives, and to facilitate collaboration with them and among them. Such collaboration would serve many purposes from supporting agribusiness-friendly regulatory environments to developing transportation and land use plans that recognize and promote the unique needs of agribusiness.

Chair Saalfeld: Ultimately, the question is: does the Board want to adopt the Report? First, it would go to the Legislative and Human Resources Committee and then to the Board of Commissioners. It is a great report, and underscores the importance of this industry in Kent County. It also deals with the other important elements including labor, transportation, production, water and land, etc.

Q & A

Com. Mast: How do we make this a West Michigan issue? Are Ottawa and Allegan Counties doing the same things? Both land and water preservation are emphasized. Kent County has a PDR ordinance but should that be looked at again? Water quality/ preservation is a major issue.

Chair Saalfeld: This report was designed in a similar way as the Community Collaboration Work Group (CCWG) report which enables other groups to begin work on some of the recommendations. The Chamber of Commerce is already working on a few. It is much larger than Kent County.

Ms. Swanson: Kent County participates in many regional groups such as The Right Place, Inc., GVMC, etc. Transportation planning is done on a regional level and water does not stop at jurisdictional boundaries.

Com. Stek: What is the current state of the freight and rail system in Kent County?

Chair Saalfeld: It is mostly private. A lot of unused trunk lines were converted to other uses such as trails but rail is now in demand. Once it is gone, it is gone. If you still have it, do not give it away because it may be needed later.

Ms. Swanson: Even though some of these assets are privately owned, The Right Place helps link those private assets to public assets like the Port of Muskegon.

Com. Bulkowski: We overplay the card "*when it is gone, it is gone*," when it comes to rails because bike paths can be moved. We underplay the development of the land because when you build 100 houses on former farmland it is impossible to turn it back to farmland. We want agricultural land but we do not want to tell anyone what to do with their property. It is a Catch 22. The frustration with the report is the lack of an action plan. Should we fund an educational position or a position focused on facilitating cooperation with agribusiness? If we simply say, "educate and collaborate," all of the good work that went into this report will sit on the shelf while more acres turn into subdivisions. Would like to see clearer action steps.

Chair Saalfeld: This report was not intended to solve all the issues. This is a positive first step. This report is important because it does not give detailed in-depth recommendations about what should be done. It lets the experts use this to move forward.

Com. Vonk: Can we determine what has happened in the townships since the Urban Sprawl Report with regard to farmland preservation and zoning? Look at what is or is not working.

Ms. Swanson: The Grand Valley Metro Council is undertaking the creation of a baseline and tracking through GIS.

Com. Jones: Agribusiness really does matter and this report will have momentum. It was a wonderful opportunity to be an ACWG member.

Com. Talen: Asked for clarification of the process. The Standing Rules say that a report as a whole is received and that the recommendations of the report can be, by the decision of the Chair, referred to a particular committee.

Chair Saalfeld: The Standing Rules, Section 6.2 (second paragraph), say:

On or after receipt, the Chair of the Board or Standing Committee that received the final written report may place the item on an agenda for additional discussion or refer specific recommendations to the appropriate Standing Committee for review and recommendation to the Board.

Chair intends to refer the report to the Legislative and Human Resources Committee for adoption and then it would come back to the Board.

Com. Talen: The chart following Section 6.2 of the Standing Rules indicates that the intent is to not adopt the report. It talks about referring for *additional discussion*, not for *adoption*. It clearly says the recommendations are what goes to the Board or Committee.

Chair Saalfeld: Corporate Counsel will look at the rules and respond in writing. It will be handled identically to the way the CCWG report was handled.

Public Comment

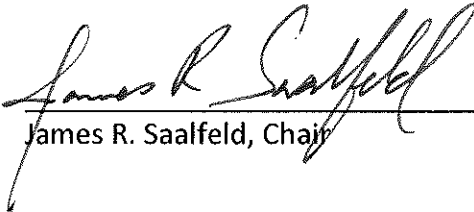
Dennis Heffron, 7724 Ashley Avenue, Belding (Chair of the Kent County Agricultural Preservation Board) – He commended the Board on the excellent report and today's presentation. Great resources were brought into the process. Kent County is looked upon by surrounding counties as the leader in West Michigan. The townships have done an excellent job with their master plans and ordinances, but some townships lack the tools to implement. How can we help the townships implement their plans? The ACWG did an excellent job of bringing to light the importance of agribusiness.

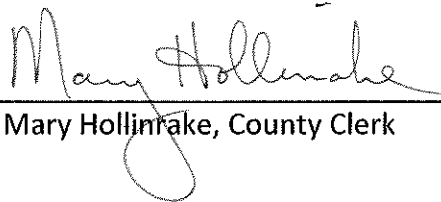
Other Business

There was no other business.

ADJOURNMENT

At 8:30 a.m., Chair Saalfeld adjourned the work session.


James R. Saalfeld, Chair


Mary Hollinrake, County Clerk